

PRESS CONFERENCE

La Stampa – Vatican News

26 ottobre 2023

On the Ecumenical Dimension of the Synod on Synodality

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Pope Francis first spoke of « synodality: soon after his election as Bishop of Rome in 2013, in a now-famous interview that he gave to Fr Antonio Spadaro, SJ, then editor of *La Civiltà Cattolica* (“A Big Heart Open to God,” *America Magazine*, September 2013). He mentioned the important work contained in the “Ravenna Document” of the Joint Orthodox-Catholic Theological Commission that explored the conciliar or synodal nature of the church and the exercise of authority. Pope Francis observed that the Catholic Church has much to receive and learn from the Orthodox Church concerning the practice of “synodality.” This same insight was restated several months later in his Apostolic Exhortation on the Joy of the Gospel (*Evangelii Gaudium*, November 2013).

Already in 1995, Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical letter *Ut Unum Sint*, On Catholic Commitment to Ecumenism, committed himself and his successors to “heed the request made of [him]” by ecumenical partners, to find “a way of exercising the Roman primacy which, while in no way renouncing what is essential to its mission,” might better serve the bonds of communion among the churches.

Since that time, many Christian communions have responded with constructive observations and suggestions concerning the exercise of primacy in response to Pope John Paul II’s invitation for dialogue and study of this matter. In official bi-lateral dialogues as well, scholars and church leaders have been studying the question of the exercise of authority in the church, pointing to the need for primacy to be balanced by collegiality (the cooperation of all the bishops in church governance), and synodality (structures for gathering all the baptized faithful, encouraging their full participation at every level of church life). Staff at the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity have been carefully studying these responses and agreements, which should form an important resource for Catholic ecumenical learning as we embark upon the process of learning how to become a more synodal church. The desire of all the world’s bishops to take the theme of “synodality” as a priority for the present synodal process is the fruit of decades of reflection, in a long process of maturation, that has included significant dialogue with ecumenical partners.

An important feature of the present synodal assembly is the presence of fraternal delegates from the Christian World Communions. This is not a new practice, but it is one that we perhaps take too much for granted. The contributions of fraternal delegates to our reflections have been very important. In the Canadian context, important exchanges took place in our own synodal consultations, where representatives of other Christian churches shared their own lived experience with the practice of synodality in church governance. This is an important example of “receptive

ecumenism,” of learning from one another’s best practices, each church recognizing the need for renewal and growth so that we might live the Gospel more fully.

Finally, “synodality” has become a preferred image or paradigm for our common journey toward becoming a church that is fully reconciled. The faith that we share is much greater than the questions that continue to divide us. Humanity has need of a united witness, a credible witness to the possibility of healing and reconciliation. So, by walking together, sharing God’s abundant love for all of humanity and all of creation, we are growing closer together and learning again to live as one. The witness of the leaders of the Christian World Communions gathered together in prayer at the ecumenical vigil at the opening of the Synod was a powerful sign of our commitment to walk together and to receive the gift of unity so deeply desired by Christ, who prayed that his followers be made one (John 17), to become a prophetic sign in a divided world.